Would Colour by any other Name Shine as Bright?
In the light of David Batchelor's books on colour: "Chromophobia" (2000), and "The Luminous and the Grey" (2014)

"It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that, in the West, since Antiquity, colour has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded."[i]
So begins David Batchelor's monumental reboot of how we think, write and experience colour today. As Batchelor puts it, "This loathing of colour, this fear of corruption through colour, needs a name: chromophobia."[ii] *Chromophobia* first published in 2000, since republished in eight languages, has given the word global idiomatic status. It has acquired general usage in the artworld as well as spilling over into online dictionaries where it carries a sense of medical gravitas, suggesting a new type of psychological condition, the fear of colour, akin to other phobias such as the fear of crowds or heights.

Batchelor diagnoses original symptoms of an apartheid of colour in the ancient Greeks who were the first to make a loaded differentiation between colour and its other. Aristotle had argued against colour saying that the "repository of thought in art is line, the rest is ornament." [iii] Ever since colour has been understood as superficial, an ephemeral occurrence on the surface of things, whereas linearity and subdued colour is deemed permanent, structural and meaningful.

Chromophobia came as a surprise to artists, cultural theorists and scientists since it spoke so stridently without aligning itself to any particular school of thought. It was decidedly non-academic and non-specialist whilst resting on a profound knowledge of the relevant scientific and aesthetic positions. In one stroke *Chromophobia* created a paradigm shift that left an entire generation of colour thinkers blindsided. The readerly-writing Batchelor's uses in his books reflects his practice as a visual artist accustomed to non-verbal communication, and his studies at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies where he would have woven a path between artistic practice, literary theory, linguistics and an anthropology of popular culture.

From this kind of critical position Batchelor can say that ,"*Chromophobia* is not, strictly speaking, a book about colour. Rather, it is a book about ideas about colour and, in particular, a book about texts." [iv]

Yet the title of the book is misleading, since the real heart of the work is the opposite of chromophobia, namely chromophilia, that is the love and joy of colour. The book begins by focusing on a negative attitude to colour, treating it as an illness, where the traditional cure has been "the many and varied attempts to purge colour, either by making it the property of some foreign body, the oriental, the feminine, the infantile, the vulgar, or the pathological."[v] This kind of sensitivity to the belittlement of colour begins to suggest a dialectical appreciation for the opposite end of the spectrum, namely the seductive possibilities of colour and the ontological wonder of light.

While Batchelor does not hide his own chromophilia in these texts and in his own practice, he is quick to point out that "the fact of intense colour in a work of art is no guarantee of its interest as a work of art or as a work of colour; it is not the presence of colour in a work that matters but the use of that colour; it isn't whether the colour is there that is at stake but what that colour does."[vi] What remains unstated is the next stage of a colour aesthetics, how to establish a critical difference between the colour of the nursery room, the colours of mass consumption and the free use of colour in a successful work of contemporary art.

In many of Batchelor's reference texts, the more that is said about colour the more knots are created in language as it approaches the phenomenal edge of perception. Colour is verifiable as an event, it surrounds us at all times, but the words we use to divide the spectrum of colour into functional divisions is quite arbitrary and untranslatable between different cultures and ages. The word 'red', or any colour term in any language, has no inherent chromatic value and is only an arbitrary signifier shifting under cultural and historical differences. Colour is there, but it continually eludes linguistic possession.

Ultimately colour like most things is historical. Before the 20th century colour came from earthly pigments sometimes captured in a tube. Later on synthetic colours were produced in tins and made from laboratory concoctions. Today we are surrounded by electronic screens, hand held phones and vast media facades, composed of light emitting diodes or digital picture cells. The demand for colour in these non-art situations, particularly industrial surfaces made for mass consumption, has pushed art making away from the accurate representation of flesh to the seductive presentation of colour that might compete with the spectacles of modern industrialisation. As Batchelor points out the difference between colour in the first two stages is symbolised by the difference between the colour wheel and the colour chart.[vii] The colour wheel is historically steeped and scientifically justified in its hierarchies of colour, that rationalise the visible and makes it ready for representation. Whereas the colour chart is a "disposable list of readymade colour" in a "grammarless accumulation of colour units" [viii] that strips colour free from colour theory and places it in an entirely autonomous zone ready for abstraction.

A third step is implied in relation to the colour cell, that is, the picture cell of the video and computer screen. These are the colours of any screen we might use for domestic entertainment, telephony, global location, gaming platforms, video art or media facades. The pixel that makes up the LCD screen on a phone or the plasma screen that hangs in a gallery is electronically endowed with a colour more intense than any pigment could ever be. What permits the impossible brightness and thinness of electronic colour is plastic itself, the plastic of the surface of the monitor and the plastic components that hold the screen elements together.

In the history of painting, pigments were originally refined by hand from natural materials such as ochre, beetle eggs, flowers and crushed shellfish. Later industrial science and the petrochemical industry produced synthetic pigments that were more intense and not reliant on expensive exotic biomass. Today the colour cell has no origin in material substances at all, shining out from the

interior of electronic light itself. The colours of a digital screen have moved beyond the materiality of pigment towards something like structural color. Structural colour occurs in nature without pigment through optical effects such as interference, refraction, and diffraction. It happens when the arrangement of physical structures interacting with light produce a particular iridescent disturbance in colour, as in peacock feathers, mother of pearl shell, beetle shells and butterfly wings.

Batchelors notes in *The Luminous and the Grey* that it is the city where this particular kind of luminous colour came into existence and continues to thrive. Through Walter Benjamin, the first great nocturnal wanderer of the modern city, he poses the question, "What makes advertisements so superior to criticism? answering, "not what the moving neon sign says – but the fiery pool reflecting in the asphalt."[ix] Neon was for Benjamin, what LED technology is for us, a source of "colours that escape their containers and bleed into the street"[x] freed at last from the "localized chemical materialism"[xi] of paint. Yet this new colour space of the city has one condition attached, it must be nocturnal. "It emerges at night and melts into reflections that soak the city"[xii] thriving on an electronic luminosity that shines out against the contrasting backdrop of darkness. The luminous colours, of the city stand in stark contrast to the colours of nature which depend on daylight where "the brighter the illumination, the brighter and more sumptuous the colour of plants, insects birds and other animals."[xiii]

Some interesting exceptions exist, notably bioluminescence in creatures that emit their own source of light, and in the cultural domain, media facades or luminous screens that are created specifically to glow during the day.[xiv] However these exceptions to the rule, "deep sea fish … competing for attention in the dead of night" and "modern building envelopes (that) … change at breathtaking speeds"[xv], tend to be exceptions that prove the rule. They do this by showing, as Batchelor insists, that the luminous can only exist in the context of the grey where the grey stands for the absence of colour.[xvi] So it is the absence of light in the abyssal ocean and in the dark spaces between pixels and diodes, that makes those kinds of luminosity so spectacular.

In any discussion of Batchelor's books it is important to remember that he comes to the topic primarily as a practicing artist who once called himself a painter, but now works in three-dimensional structures and photographs that relate to colour in all its urban intensities. While he only occasionally uses the proper name 'painting' in relation to his work, what remains from that discipline is a primary sensibility for the construction and composition of colour. Many of the materials he uses in his work are the colourful detritus of global capitalism, lurid plastics, lightboxes from commercial advertising, industrially coloured containers, any brightly coloured contemporary thing that has been made available for everyday usage. The minimalisation of the craft of painting left in the artist a strong conceptual interest in colour itself, producing in turn a new kind of studio practice and a new kind of thinking that had to be spoken.

Batchelors books begin and end with an irresolvable tension between two primary terms or clusters of ideas. In *Chromophobia* it was repression versus the love of colour, and in the most recent book, as indicated by the title, it is the luminosity of new colour versus the greyed-out absence of colour. In each case we might reasonably expect some kind of synthetic resolution between all dialectical opponents. However no synthesis occurs, only a productive torsion as Batchelor puts it, "colour needs resistance and thrives on opposition. In the city the luminous is almost always accompanied by the grey. (…) The grey makes the luminous more luminous and the luminous makes the grey so much greyer." [xvii]Thus the opposition between the luminous and the grey becomes an inter-penetration, where the heat of luminosity is multiplied rather than cancelled out by the coolness of grey tones. Quite unexpectedly Batchelor has shifted his mood in favour of the grey, finding it the "fall guy", an underdog, who for a brief fascinating moment, has its time in the sun. This comes to grey despite the wealth of opinion about its tedious light sucking propensity. Even Wittgenstein had thrown down the challenge to imagine a "grey-hot"[xviii] or luminous grey, finally conceding it was outside our possible range of experience and so must remain silent and unseen. Batchelor takes up this challenge by pointing to the

obvious everyday examples of black and white movies on TV and grey clouds backlit by the sun.[xix]

The dance of the luminous and the grey reaches a poetic crescendo in the last pages of the book when Batchelor considers Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev*, a black and white film about the great 15th-century Russian icon painter which features a final climactic scene of colour. The film becomes a vehicle for exploring the independence of colour freed from any relation to thingliness. "As all the colours in this part of the film are literally flat – the colours of a painting rather than the colours of three-dimensional things – they appear not so much as the colours of things but as colours in themselves. (…) In having no mundane descriptive function they appear all the more luminous and transparent." [xx]

Yet the same scene has something to say about the enduring luminosity of grey in the aftermath of colour, giving grey ironic prominence in the chromophile's vocabulary of sensibility. "In the final minute of the film, as the camera moves horizontally across the distressed surface of another icon, rain begins to fall on its surface and appears to wash away the mesmerising but fragile colours. The last, silent shot returns to the living world and to a panorama of grey, but a quieter and perhaps more luminous grey."[xxi]

Mark Titmarsh February - August 2014

[i] David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, London: Reaktion, 2000, 22
[ii] ibid*,* 22
[iii]ibid,, 29
[iv] David Batchelor, *The Luminous and The Grey*, 13
[v] David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 22-23
[vi] David Batchelor, *The Luminous and The Grey*, p17
[vii] David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 104-6
[viii] ibid
[ix] David Batchelor, *The Luminous and The Grey*, 43
[x] ibid, 49
[xi] Mario Pedrosa, "The Utopia of Painting" quoted by Batchelor, *The Luminous and The Grey*, 44
[xii] David Batchelor, *The Luminous and The Grey*, 59
[xiii] ibid, 60
[xiv] M. Hank Haeusler, *Chromatophoric Architecture*, Berlin, Jovis Verlag, 2010
[xv] Martina Eberle, "Foreword", in Haeusler, *Chromatophoric Architecture*, 8-9
[xvi] David Batchelor, *The Luminous and The Grey*, 60
[xvii]ibid, 60
[xviii] Ludwig Wittgenstein quoted by Batchelor, *The Luminous and The Grey*, 67
[xix] David Batchelor, *The Luminous and The Grey,* 90
[xx] ibid 95
[xxi] ibid*,* 96